

# OCEAN DRIVE

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**"I CAME TO IT QUESTIONING HOW REAL A REALITY SHOW IS. I WASN'T GOING TO SELL MY SOUL TO THE DEVIL."**

true first exposure came through fashion magazines. All these clients discovered South Beach."

In 1984, she moved her agency from Fort Lauderdale to Ocean Drive. She bought the Sun Ray Efficiencies, a shoddy port-windowed apartment house where the gruesome chain-saw scene in the film *Scarface* was shot.

"It was a big step to move to South Beach," Marie says. "It was a boom like a gold rush."

But those days are now history. Today crews must contend with the high costs of rentals, hotel rooms and just about everything involving a location. And high fashion has found alternate locales in South Africa, Uruguay and the Caribbean.

"Business has plateaued and declined," she says. "To stay in business you have to become more creative. You have to diversify. Nothing stays the same."

Where in the early '90s Marie housed as many as 25 or 30 models in apartments for the season, today she says she puts up 12 to 15. Comparing those heady days with today, she estimates that business has been reduced by at least a third.

Despite the lull, South Beach is an attractive locale for a sassy young MTV production. And one could say the network had a hand in forging the sinful burg's current glamorous identity by choosing Miami as the location for two consecutive Video Music Awards and the entire fifth season of *The Real World*, as well as several appearances in shows such as *Cribs*, *Making the Band* and *My Super Sweet 16*.

"Setting the show in South Beach seemed like the right idea," says executive producer Tony DiSanto. "And we chose Irene Marie because she's a pioneer in the industry. She's a huge asset." Hosannas aside, the thrust of the show is to portray the nitty-gritty world models face as they begin their careers.

"We want to show what young models go through when they are trying to make it," he says. "We show how they deal with the pressure of competition and the pressure of having to look good, as well as their own personal dramas."

Without revealing story lines, DiSanto says the show examines the identity crises models experience while going to casting calls and sharing an apartment with their competitors. South Beach provides a glittery, tumultuous backdrop of sex-driven parties. But does the show document a starry-eyed model's encounter with the devil? Is there a scene, for example, where the 19-year-old Christian model from Kansas City, the luscious-looking Britt, is offered a line of cocaine? Alas, no. The show stays in the realm of a positive young teen drama.

Marie came to the project with serious concerns. On one hand, she had a juicy opportunity for major exposure as a modeling-industry bigwig. On the other, she was faced with a reality production that could potentially wreak havoc by telling a grim tale that could cast a pall on her business.

"I came to it questioning how real a reality show is," Marie says at her office. "I have 25 years of clean reputation to safeguard. I needed to know if I could trust these people. I didn't know the process." But after meeting closely with producers and getting their concept, she went with her intuition.

"It was not something I moved into without a great deal of reflection," Marie says. "I wasn't going to sell my soul to the devil."

Still, she made the necessary accommodations for a camera crew and production handlers to invade every nook of her agency. Not only were the featured models pictured moping around on slow days, surely strategizing against one another in reality-show style, but cameramen also haunted the reception desk, requesting retakes from the receptionist.

"It was a pain in the ass," says one employee. But if anyone knows the power of publicity, it is Irene Marie. Having grown up in South Dade, she pursued a short modeling career in Paris during the 1970s, then returned to Miami at the dawn of the '80s and founded her agency on a fluke. Paris agent Louise Despont urged Marie to launch at a time when the

only business going was catalog work for Burdines and other regional campaigns. But on her friend's advice, Marie set up shop.

"I proposed to open an agency without any justification or experience in business," Marie says. "The only thing I had was hands-on modeling experience and empathy for models."

Her instincts, though, brought her to a business that would eventually transform South Beach from a derelict waiting room for senior citizens and refugees to a fashion juggernaut that defined an era. She was among the first to bring the European fashion industry to South Beach. Not only were the settings perfect, with distressed and faded art deco backdrops and tropical ambiance, but, more importantly, large crews could also set up elaborate shoots cheaply and stay in rundown hotels for next to nothing.

"In essence, that started Miami," Marie says. "The